

School Traits: A Report On Rural Schools New And Aspiring Teachers Choose First

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to survey new and aspiring teachers from Northern State University in Aberdeen, South Dakota, and ask them to identify a set of school traits that they believe are most important when they first seek employment in new schools as teachers upon graduating from college. The participants were forty-three new and aspiring teachers participating in the Northern State University Teacher Induction Program who are ready to begin their teaching careers in elementary and secondary education. The new teachers were asked to identify a specific set of environmental, professional, school location, and career longevity factors that they consider important when choosing a new school. The NSU Teacher Induction Program is a follow-up support and data collection program for new teachers who are entering education after they graduate from Northern State University and starting their first year of teaching. The data collected documents trends and issues and is reported to Northern State University School of Education.

Keywords: teacher induction; school traits; Northern State University; new teachers; first-year teacher

INTRODUCTION

Prior research projects conducted by the Northern State University Teacher Induction Program revealed traits that school principals most value when they hire new teachers for their schools. Principals sought out new teachers with good personality traits including, passion, maturity, flexibility, creativity, organization, content knowledge, along with many other traits important to success in schools. This research project reversed the question, and asked new and aspiring teachers, either in their first year of teaching or about to graduate from NSU, to rate school environmental, professional, community, and career longevity traits they believed were important to them as they begin their teaching careers or start searching for new teaching positions for the first time.

So, what makes a good school for new teachers to find success? There is no set of absolute traits, but there are some universal truths. A good school is a community of parents, administrators, teachers and students. A good school, like a good class, is run by someone with vision, passion, and compassion. A good school has teachers who still enjoy the challenge, no matter their age or experience (Wulf, 1997). Other educational constituencies have their own set of traits that best describe a good school where people like to work and educate children. In 2002, five student groups shared their ideas of what makes a good school with educators at an ISTE Leadership Symposium. Students and educators found common threads among their interests and concerns for what makes a good school (Armstrong, 2002).

- The learning environment should be safe.
- Learning spaces should be open and airy.
- The curriculum should be comprehensive but student driven.
- Activities should be hands on and related to real-world work.
- An array of technology tools and access should be available at all times, from home and school.
- Varied learning styles should be honored.
- Emotional and intellectual support should be offered to students

DISCUSSION

New teachers from Northern State University participating in this project evaluated four sets of school traits and first assessed school reputation and environmental issues that may be important to them. Beginning teachers from NSU considered those schools that practiced the most current teaching methods, provided modern classroom technology, kept small class sizes, and maintained modern, clean school facilities a necessity. One new teacher said, “The top school issues/needs for me when I decided on my first school were a clean, safe classroom environment and a balanced workload. It seems like the bulk of my waking time will be spent at school.” Another student said, “To have the latest technology is vital to teaching students to the best of our ability. Having a variety of instructional materials and support for varied instructional methods to teach students is very important to me.”

Many of the new teachers suggested basic environmental characteristics important to them were good relationships and a “close personal feeling” they could create at a new school. The basic set of school environmental traits valued by new teachers included the following:

- A “home” feeling, belonging, and being welcomed to the school
- Good school culture
- A family atmosphere
- A chance to get to know students
- Good teaching resources
- A Personal touch

School professionalism was the second set of school traits new teachers were asked to consider when thinking about the type of school where they would like to begin their teaching careers. New and aspiring teachers from NSU said they thought the school they would choose should have strong administrative support for new teachers, a positive, professional ethos, teamwork, good communication networks, strong standards and values, and an emphasis on creating respectful students. One NSU student commented on her philosophy of professional school traits that she believed essential in a new school, “I feel that it is important that the school faculty support each other and work together and not just teacher to teacher or administration to teacher, I think all staff members need to work together and support one another in order to be successful and provide students with the best education possible where a new teacher can strive for success without feeling they are alone.” Many sentiments concerning professionalism in the school culture were similar to this comment; “Friendliness and professionalism of school staff is important to me because when I am surrounded by positive, friendly people, it will be easier for me to stay positive and up-beat. A positive school culture is important in creating positive students and a positive teaching attitude.”

The third set of school district traits NSU beginning teachers were asked to evaluate, and probably the most controversial, was school location and community factors. Data from Associated School Boards of South Dakota (2006) revealed that 60% of the South Dakota’s current teaching workforce is expected to retire within the next fifteen to twenty years leaving schools, especially remote, rural schools, with a significant problem of how to fill growing teaching vacancies. Toner (2004) states, “Across the great plains rural schools have withered away over the decades as entire communities have faltered” and new teachers are growing increasingly wary of choosing to start their teaching careers in the most remote corners of rural farm communities that struggle to provide the most basic living comforts and conveniences such as medical care, day care, food, and groceries. For the past 30 years, nonmetropolitan counties and the towns that dot this nation’s landscape have been steadily losing population (Carr & Kefalas, 2010). Some of the most isolated schools in rural communities may be hundreds of miles from population centers offering entertainment, shopping, and comfortable, modern housing opportunities. Even rural schools located closer to population centers struggle to attract new teachers due to an absence of basic community features. “It is a familiar story across rural stretches of the Great Plains, where the state of the local schools often serves as a barometer for the health of the community ... (Toner, 2004). The obstacles for rural districts are greatest in the 900 high-poverty rural districts identified in mostly southern and western states across the country. Salaries are a major issue in most rural districts which don’t have the resources to pay teachers higher salaries that larger school districts can afford. Quality housing and local community amenities are other issues many rural districts face (Dessoff, 2010).

Similar school and community socioeconomic issues described by researchers are very evident in South Dakota communities where some schools are often located great distances from population centers, and new teachers will often have to contemplate teaching in small towns and country schools with few community comforts available to them. Simple items such as food and groceries may not be readily available to purchase let alone needs such as routine medicine or health care commodities. One NSU first year teacher decided to move to a small town nearby Northern State University, but she soon discovered the town had no grocery store available to purchase basic medicinal items for a common cold and sore throat. She said, "My friends suggested I buy some Nyquil for my cold, but I told them there was no place in town that carried those types of items." Along with a lack of convenience items, school district reorganization and consolidation are other threats that hinder small districts in their recruitment efforts. One student said, "I want a new school with a bright future, I would not want one that would be closing down in the next year or two." While a large percentage of Northern State University beginning educators did not prefer, or even desire to live in isolated, remote communities far from population centers, many did appear ready to consider smaller towns more closely located near population centers. New and aspiring teachers considered no commute to school, health care, child care, and community safety important to them. More new teachers preferred to begin in larger South Dakota communities rather than small towns, but very few NSU new teachers chose to even consider large, metropolitan, urban centers outside of South Dakota to begin their teaching careers. One NSU student said, "I would definitely like to stay in or near South Dakota. I am terrified of large cities, so Minneapolis or Chicago are definitely a "no go!" for me. Aside from issues such as school size and location, most new and aspiring teachers mostly hoped for the basic amenities from a new school and community, one that was friendly to new teachers, a good place for families, and a wide array of community entertainment activities in which to participate.

Career considerations and longevity factors was the fourth and final domain of school traits that new teachers were asked to examine when contemplating the type of school where they would like to begin their teaching careers. New teachers said they were not going to favor schools that offered them low salaries and poor benefits, but those two factors alone would not necessarily be deal breakers for them. Instead many first year teachers were most fearful of schools that offered poor administrative support and unclear expectations. One person stated, "Poor administrative support, feelings of isolation, and difficult parent relationships could affect the length of my stay in a school district. All three of these factors are important to me as a teacher, but a teacher most definitely needs to be supported by the administration." Another young teacher agreed with that sentiment, "Poor working conditions where you don't know what is expected from day to day is difficult enough, but if the expectations are unrealistic it is even more difficult and highly frustrating. Poor school administration makes for a disorganized school that does not function cohesively as a unit." Other new teachers were more fearful of feelings of internal school isolation, loneliness, and a lack of professionalism. "Feelings of isolation may stunt my growth as a teacher and lead me to pursue a different field of study." Many new teachers said respect from veteran teachers could also affect their career longevity. "A lack of respect from older, veteran staff members is a big issue with me. Just because we are young doesn't mean we need to be treated like we are five years old. We are all professional, talk to me like I am a professional."

DATA COLLECTION

This study was created and conducted by the Teacher Induction Program at Northern State University, a small liberal arts university in rural northeastern South Dakota with a 108 year history of preparing students to become classroom teachers, counselors, and school principals. The mission of the NSU Teacher Induction Program is to serve as a follow-up support program to help first-year teachers adjust to the education profession. It also serves to educate first-year teachers and graduating seniors majoring in elementary and secondary education and help them better understand issues they may face as they start their teaching careers.

Sixty-two first-year and aspiring teachers from Northern State University were asked to rate a set of sixty school traits they considered important when searching for a school to teach for the first time, and forty-three people responded to the electronic survey. Two groups of NSU students were asked to complete the survey including: 1) New teachers with one year of teaching experience who joined the Northern State University Teacher Induction Program, and 2) Northern State University students completing their Bachelor of Science in Education Degrees who are currently looking for their first teaching position in education. A Likert scale was created to rank school traits as unimportant, somewhat important, important, or highly important. School traits were divided into the following four

domains: school environment and reputation, school professionalism, school location and community, career longevity in education.

FINDINGS

Domain One: School Environment and Reputation

The first domain identified the top five school environment and reputation traits that first-year teachers and aspiring teachers considered most important when searching for a new school in which to teach. One-hundred percent of new teachers believed a balanced workload was important or highly important in their search for a new school followed by 97.7 percent of first-year teachers who believed a safe environment was considered either important or highly important. Ninety-five percent thought both a variety of teaching materials and a clean and tidy school were important or highly important, and 93 percent thought the overall academic reputation of the school was important or highly important in their search for employment in their new school. Other highly valued school environmental traits new teachers considered important included academic reputation, updated technology, and a good physical classroom environment.

Top Five School Environment and School Reputation Traits Considered Important by New and Aspiring Teachers

- Balanced Workload
- Safe Environment
- Comfortable Class Size
- Clean and Tidy School Facility
- Overall School Reputation

Domain Two: School Professionalism

The second domain identified the top professional traits that first-year teachers considered most important when searching for a new school in which to teach. One-hundred percent of new teachers believed all five traits listed below were school traits that were either important or highly important in their search for a new school to teach. Other school professional traits that were highly valued by new and first-year teachers were a positive school culture and strong support for new teachers.

Top Five School Professional Traits Considered Important by New and Aspiring Teachers

- Strong School Standards and Values
- Respectful Students
- Support Professional Growth
- Strong Administrative Support
- Friendly, Committed School Staff

Domain Three: School Location and Community

The third domain identified the top five school location and community traits first-year teachers preferred or highly preferred when searching for a new school in which to teach. The results for this domain were divided into two categories, the first category was school and community traits preferred or highly preferred, and school and the second category was community traits that were not preferred or not highly preferred. Ninety-five percent of new teachers believed a welcoming friendly attitude was either preferred or highly preferred, while 88.4 percent of new and first-year teachers considered healthcare needs were preferred or highly preferred. Other school location and community traits that were preferred or highly preferred were nearby shopping and groceries opportunities (83.7%), a short commute to school (81.4%), and a community that was good for their families (76.8). When new and aspiring teachers considered school location and community choice, the results of this study indicated that 64.3

percent of new teachers preferred schools in a small town school near a larger community in an upper mid-western setting. However, there were no clear indications the upper mid-western state of choice would specifically have to be the state of South Dakota; in fact, nearly one-third of new and first-year teachers participating in this study said they would not want to teach in a South Dakota school district.

Top Six School Location and Community Traits Preferred or Highly Preferred by New and Aspiring Teachers

- Welcoming, Friendly Attitude
- Healthcare Nearby
- Shopping and Groceries Nearby
- Short Commute to School
- Good for Families
- A Small Town Near a Larger Town

School location and community traits that were not preferred, or not highly preferred, included small schools located in isolated, rural communities (79.1%) and schools requiring a distant commute to school each day (79%). A large percentage of new and first-year teachers (72.1%) did not prefer to teach in an urban or suburban school location, and (62.8) would not choose an international school. A large plurality of new and first-year teachers (44.2) did not want to teach out of the upper Midwest.

Top Five School Location and Community Traits Not Preferred by New and Aspiring Teachers

- An Isolated Rural Community
- A Distant Commute to School
- An Urban/Suburban School
- An International School
- A School Out of the Upper Midwest

Domain Four: Career Longevity in Education

The fourth domain asked new and first-year teachers to consider factors that could most affect their career longevity in a new school location, and 100 percent of new and first-year teachers indicated that poor administrative support and lack of staff professionalism (90.7%) were the two factors that could have the greatest effect on their length of stay at a local school district. Additionally, a large percentage of new and first-year teachers (88.4%) thought feelings of isolation, low salaries, and poor benefits could affect their education careers. New and first-year teachers also believed that unclear expectations (88.3%) and unrealistic expectations (81%) could also affect their stay in a school district.

Top Five Career Longevity Factors Considered by New and Aspiring Teachers

- Poor Administrative Support
- Lack of Staff Professionalism
- Feelings of Isolation
- Low Salary and Benefits
- Unclear Expectations

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this project indicated that new and first-year teachers are seeking employment positions in schools that offer conditions that give them the best chance for long term success in their teaching careers. They want to select schools that are neat, tidy, safe, and offer a balanced work load, and fair class sizes. They also want schools that have strong academic values, respectful students, support for new teachers, and offer professional

growth opportunities. New and first-year teachers prefer new schools that are located in, or near, communities that offer shopping and services for themselves and their families without a long drive to school each day. Beginning teachers from Northern State University did not prefer communities that are located in distant, isolated locations away from population centers in South Dakota, which contributes to an ever growing teacher shortage issue in a state that has many isolated small towns. NSU new and first-year teachers also want schools with a bright future that offer job security without the threat of re-organization or closure, a trend that continues to plague small South Dakota communities and schools. While new and first-year teachers from Northern State University indicated they do not want to teach in urban and suburban communities, they do prefer small town schools located near larger communities in the upper Midwest.

Finally, for South Dakota schools to keep teachers at their schools once they are employed, they have to offer strong administrative support to new and first-year teachers and provide opportunities for new teachers to develop a sense of belonging and involvement in the school district. If new teachers feel isolated with a sense of poor professionalism within the teaching staff they may choose to look elsewhere for continued employment in the teaching profession. Two aspiring NSU teachers commented, “I hope any new school where I would start my teaching career would be open to new ideas, have a committed teaching staff, and promote teamwork and collegiality. All three of these ideas make it the best possible environment for a teacher to succeed. I would want a school with positive values focused on teamwork and support for new teachers. Without these elements schools can be a very difficult place to work.”

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Craig D. Kono served as classroom teacher, high school principal, and school superintendent in K-12 South Dakota schools from 1979 to 2001. He received his Bachelor’s Degree in Secondary Education in 1979 and his Master’s Degree in Secondary Administration in 1988 from Northern State University in Aberdeen, South Dakota. He earned his Doctor’s Degree in Educational Administration from the University of South Dakota in 2001, and is currently an Associate Professor of Educational Administration at Northern State University in Aberdeen, South Dakota.

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